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Conceptual Intentions as a Basis for Listening to Acousmatic Music

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Abstract

Listening to acousmatic music has been the topic of several publications in the past decades, although it has rarely been studied extensively and in a systematic way, regarding acousmatic music specifically. Acousmatic music psychology studies are quite hard to find (Dean & Bailes 2011, 2012), and a lot of proposals about acousmatic music listening are rooted in semiotics, phenomenology or cognitive theories, with few or no input from actual listeners (Schaeffer 1966, Smalley 1992, Bayle 1993, Windsor 1995, Kilpatrick & Stansbie 2010, Pasoulas 2011, Meric 2012, Kendall 2014, Thoresen 2015). Two exceptions deserve to be mentioned. Leigh Landy (2007) and Robert Weale (2005) developed the Intention/Reception project, through which they showed that listeners were more drawn in by electroacoustic music when information about the composers' intentions were given. However, Delalande's "listening behaviors" paradigm (1989, 1998, 2010) and its developments by Alcázar (2004), Anderson (2011) and Spampinato (2015) suggest that without being aware of composers' intentions, unexperienced listeners can still have a rich and satisfying listening experience.

As a composer I am interested in silence and its role beyond the articulatory (rests) and structural (silence at the beginning and end of a work, movement or section), towards silence being a layer of polyphonic listening (closer to the Japanese 間), as a continuo or a drone. In this sense, sound is not as important as silence, serving mostly to surround silence and enlarge it. As a student, I was often told I needed to give the listener a hand, "something to hold on to". However this was not in the sense meant by Landy (2007 – with an interest for helping out listeners not only through the work itself but through its surrounding context). The point was to have me make things abundantly clear for listeners: when there was sound on the tape, the tape wasn't silent, so I should not have been talking about silence, however relevant it could become in my own formal conception of the work. I can thus testify to the fact that listeners as well as some acousmatic music professionals often like to be guided through a work by the sounding content of the work itself rather than having to adopt a specific perspective indicated by a text or a discourse.

Cultivating commented concerts and specific program notes, encouraging students to engage in projects challenging our aural, perceptive and perceptual preconceptions, could be a way to make them actively wonder about the multiple relations between intentions and receptions and their consequences on the activity of the composer.

Listening to acousmatic music

When we think about listening to acousmatic music, we automatically think about some authors from the past 70 years. Schaeffer (1966), Smalley (1992), Bayle (1993) and Thoresen (2015), may be the most prominent of them. All four of them are also composers, whose

aesthetics had an influence on their theories about listening. And all four of them (except for Schaeffer in some way) studied listening with no reference at all to actual listeners. With all the credit they deserve for having explored the reception of this music, composers may sometimes lack the critical distance to complete a rigorously scientific research.

On the other hand, experimental procedures, trying to compensate biases with controlled environments and methods, do not necessarily make sense in a musical context. For instance, Dean and Bailes' (2011, 2012) choice to study Trevor Wishart's *Red Bird* (1973–77), searching for an effect of spectral centroid in the formal perception of the work, seems misled since *Red Bird* is mostly built around referential, real-world sound entities.

A third option relies on listeners' testimonies to answer questions about how people listen to music, how they talk about it, how certain elements may help them understand, like and want to hear more of it. Two research projects in the past 40 years have explored this question regarding acousmatic music.

During the 1980s, François Delalande (2010) led interviews at the GRM in Paris, with extracts from Pierre Henry's *Sommeil* (Delalande 1998) and Debussy's *Préludes* (Delalande 1989). In both cases, he found three main listening orientations, based on whether listeners were paying attention to structure (*taxonomic listening*), focusing on their own emotional and motor reactions to music (*empathetic listening*), or building a kind of imaginary world out of what they heard (*figurative listening*). The point was to show that listeners were able to listen to a same piece of music in different ways which all made sense – while some of the ways were incompatible with one another. Alcázar (2004), Anderson (2011), Spampinato (2015) and myself (2014, 2016) pushed these findings further to confirm that the three listening behaviours identified were at the very least a practical way to describe both listeners' discourses and listening experiences.

More recently, Leigh Landy and Robert Weale (2005) put together the Intention/Reception project, using several works of electroacoustic music to evaluate how people understood them and liked them through several hearings with different information available. They show that listeners were more drawn in by electroacoustic music, and more prone to want to hear more of this kind of music, when information about composer's intentions was given. Whether we talk about listening behaviours or composers' intentions, the point is to give listeners "something to hold on to" (Landy 1994). Whether they hold on to composers' intentions, historical or aesthetic context, possible interpretations or even an unconsciously consistent listening behaviour, listeners may be quite happy with their experience.

Something to hold on to... really tight

Nowadays (and this has been the case for some time), listeners often prefer works whose consistency is crystal-clear, whose materials are explicitly related to each other, through articulation, development, or anything else. They are used to be given everything they need in the work itself most of the time. So when there is nothing obvious for them to hold on to, they may very well start holding on to completely inappropriate elements which will not help them appreciate the music they are listening to.

At the end of a contemporary music concert, or after listening to electroacoustic music with musicology students, I have often heard things like "Ha! This isn't music, there's no melody!" or "Music is not meant for the composer to take out his problems on us like he does with all this loud noise. Catharsis is okay, but not like that!" These listeners were clearly holding on to something completely inappropriate. In the first case, searching for a melody all

along the work stopped the listener from hearing what was going on – this is what often happens with novice listeners discovering acousmatic music with no clues or pointers as to how to listen to it. In the second case, a culturally acquired meaning for loud noises in music stopped the listener from understanding the composer who actually said, before the piece was performed, that it referred to North Ireland’s civil war in the 1960s.

Thus, whether we’re talking about novice listeners, composition students or actual composers, in my experience, almost everyone prefers to be guided through a work by the work itself, rather than having to read something or listen to something explaining how the work might be listened to, how its form and content can make sense. The question that arises from this situation is whether it is necessary to have students avoid the need for explanations and to encourage them to give musical, sounding cues for listeners to be kept interested from beginning to end.

Silence as a conceptual basis for listening to acousmatic music

As a student, I was often told I needed to give the listener a hand, “something to hold on to.” But this wasn’t Landy’s concept, this was a way to have me make things abundantly clear for listeners: when there was sound on the tape, the tape wasn’t silent, so I should not have been talking about “silence”, however relevant it could become in my own conception of the work. I am going to mention my own compositional practice to anchor my ideas in empirical experience, since I have been trying for a few years to explore a specific meaning of silence in composition – which I’ve had some difficulties getting accepted by some of my peers, for above-mentioned reasons.

Silence in music is many-faced. We use it before and after a piece of music, to distinguish it from real life; we use it between two events, for rhetorical, symbolic or expressive purposes; we use it between two movements, two parts of a work, for formal purposes. Mostly, silence is this “absence of sound,” this emptiness that surrounds sounds in time. But all of us are not in agreement about that.

For instance, French composer Lucie Prod’homme talks of breaths and caesuras as short, rhetorical functions which, however silent for their duration, are not silence. To her, every event implies energy, not only in the sound itself, but in the body of the listener. Thus, silence does not exist if the energy from the preceding event has not dissipated completely.

I myself like to think of silence not only as present in parts of time, but also in parts of space. For this, no concept that I know of is available in French or English, although poetry has extensively been made around this idea of silence in space (see Corbin 2016). Just like we can say, looking at the emptiness in the sky, a few meters above us (although it is not empty from the point of view of physics), we can look at the same sky and listen to the absence of sounds coming from some parts of it. This has implications for composition, since silence becomes an integral part of the composition of space, and not only time. Silence may be listened to as a drone, for instance, or a weft, a blank canvas upon which all sounds briefly leave a trace. Before this conference, this conception seemed to me to be close to the Japanese 間 (*ma*), which has since then revealed to be much richer than that.

間 as a conceptual basis for listening to acousmatic music

In Japanese culture, the situation is reversed with 間, which begins before the absence of sound, with the absence of energy input. 間 is a multidisciplinary concept, referring roughly

to the distance between any two things, unifying them – although amongst Japanese people, it does not always mean the same thing, being founded on a deeply anchored cultural identity.

Overall, 間 is used to refer both to time (時間, *jikan*, meaning “time”; 週間, *shuukan*, meaning “week”) and space (間取り, *madori*, meaning “blueprint”; 茶の間, *cha no ma*, “the living room”) as well as identity (人間, *ningen*, meaning “human”). In architecture, it is the emptiness, the air around buildings. In martial arts, it is the connection between fight partners, allowing them to move together as one. In *butō* dance, it refers to the right rhythm, connected with one’s breathing and body, with other dancers, and with the audience.

In music, 二宮毅 (Ninomiya Tsuyoshi) talks of 間 in his piano music as the distance between two events, present in resonance and silence alike. 由雄正恒 (Yoshio Masatsune¹) adds that it is a subtle deviation of time and space between beats and rhythms, including tension rather than putting forward silence.

On the other hand, looking at 間 in music as a spatial concept, 宮木朝子 (Miyaki Asako) says that when composing, she feels like putting a stone in an empty space, thereby revealing the empty space around it. かつふじたまこ (Katsufuji Tamako) mentions a relation to slightly subtle sounds and silence. 水野みか子 (Mizuno Mikako) interprets 間 both as the distance in time and as the distance in space, depth-wise. This interpretation is much closer to what was mentioned earlier about silence in space.

Now I realize this may sound quite poetic and maybe detached from reality. In fact, 林拳兵 (Hayashi Kyohei) asserts that 間, being an integral part of Japanese culture, cannot be grasped by Occidental consciousness. The point here is not to steal a concept from the Japanese culture to justify an aesthetic orientation. It is rather to observe that through this concept, Japanese people can refer to silence, space, time, duration and connection in an intermodal way, and seem to experience it that way. Thus, listening to music and silence in this way may be one possible listening behavior to hold on to, for acousmatic music or for any kind of music, in fact. But even with the conceptual basis accepted, there are still some pragmatics to take care of.

Pragmatics of concepts and why composers shouldn’t care too much

First of all, asking listeners to learn new concepts with each new work or new composer may seem a bit much. Why should composers get to dictate how we should perceive and listen to their work? The answer to this is quite simple: offering a new concept is not a prescription, but an opening towards a new listening behaviour. In fact, any new listening behaviour might be practiced on any work of music, although it may not bring about the same results and relevance it does in the original work. Now for a couple of anecdotes about worries people have expressed in the past regarding my use of silence and very soft sounds.

Some uses of very low amplitudes may very well frustrate listeners or make them think that there is a technical problem during a concert. This has happened to me recently, as listeners of a *butō* / acousmatic performance in Paris told me that people breathing next to them were louder than the sounds they heard coming from the loudspeakers, and that they wished the sound would have been at least loud enough for them to experience immersion. Rather than answering with a definite sentence in this kind of situation, I rather encourage listeners to try

¹ Except for Ninomiya Tsuyoshi, all Japanese composers’ ideas mentioned here are the result of discussion with them at the conference and/or their answers to a short survey forwarded by 水野みか子 (Mizuno Mikako) to the Japanese Society for Electronic Music members.

and know if what they think is a technical problem was in fact intended by the composer, and if so, why – and how the reasons for this may enrich their perceptual experience.

Having an acousmatic composer listen to a piece of mine in 2014, she told me that my sounds seemed quite rich but that I should give them higher amplitudes, so that we could hear their richness more clearly. More recently, a saxophonist playing an instrumental haiku of mine told me that having a sound emerge from silence to go to *ppppp* and return to silence in five seconds meant that the sound would not be able to develop freely. In both cases, my answer would be: sure, I could make the duration longer, the amplitude higher, but this would be easing listeners into sounds, rather than having them try to grasp something beyond their scale. We do not need to use a magnifying glass or a microscope to appreciate the beauty of an ant turning around searching for the perfect piece of food to carry. When we do use these tools, the ant is not itself anymore, we are scaling it to our level, rather than scaling our perception to their level.

My closing argument will be this: as Chouvel said in 2006, as I think Landy has been arguing towards for some more time, composers are not responsible for people learning to listen, merely for people to have something to listen to that can make sense in some way. Then, getting back to a kind of communication, listeners would not be content with just recognizing “oh, that’s well crafted, I recognize this, etc.”, with just getting used to some genres. They would go further and try to understand how a specific metaphorical and conceptual perspective translates into a piece of music that can be apprehended similarly or differently from what they are used to.

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